

## This Day in History... September 21, 1897

### “Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus”

On September 21, 1897, *The Sun*, a New York City newspaper, published what would become one of the most famous editorials ever written. It was titled simply, “Is There a Santa Claus?” but is better known today as “Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus.” The editorial was written in response to a letter from an eight-year-old girl named Virginia O’Hanlon, whose simple question sparked an answer that has inspired generations.

The story begins with young Virginia asking her father the same question many children wonder at some point: *Is Santa Claus real?* Her father, Dr. Philip O’Hanlon, didn’t want to give her a direct yes or no. Instead, he encouraged her to write to *The Sun*, telling her that if something was printed in that respected paper, it must be true. Virginia took his advice and wrote a short letter explaining that some of her friends had told her there was no Santa Claus, and she wanted to know the truth.

Her letter eventually landed on the desk of Francis Pharcellus Church, one of *The Sun*’s senior editorial writers. Church was a seasoned journalist who had served as a war correspondent during the Civil War, where he had witnessed firsthand the sorrow, skepticism, and loss of faith that gripped the nation. By 1897, he was an experienced writer who understood that the question Virginia had asked was about more than Santa Claus — it was about hope, wonder, and the importance of believing in something beyond what can be seen.

Church’s response appeared in the newspaper on September 21, 1897. In it, he reassured her that “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.” He explained that Santa Claus existed “as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist,” and that the world would be a much sadder place without those things. He went on to argue that just because something cannot be seen does not mean it isn’t real, writing, “Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.” To Church, Santa Claus represented childlike faith, hope, and the childlike sense of magic that makes life joyful.

*The editorial was adapted into a cantata in 1932, making it the only such piece to be set to classical music.*

Church’s editorial struck a powerful chord with readers. At a time when America was experiencing rapid industrial growth, social change, and scientific discovery, many people struggled to reconcile faith and reason. The editorial reminded them that intangible qualities like kindness, generosity, and love were just as real as anything that could be measured or touched. In doing so, Church gave comfort not only to Virginia but to thousands of readers who saw Santa Claus as a symbol of the enduring goodness of humanity.

Over the years, Church’s response became the most reprinted newspaper editorial in the English language. It has been published in dozens of languages, adapted into books, and even turned into stage plays and television specials. Each year, Columbia University — Church’s alma mater — reads the editorial aloud during its annual Yule Log ceremony, keeping the tradition alive for new generations of students.

Virginia herself received countless letters from people who had been moved by the editorial. She often included a copy of it with her replies, saying that it had influenced her life in a positive way. Virginia went on to become an educator and later earned a doctorate from Fordham University. She credited the editorial with helping shape her optimistic worldview and her commitment to helping children.

More than 125 years later, “Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus” continues to resonate. Francis Church’s words remind readers that even in a world that can seem cynical or cold, there is value in believing in things that cannot always be seen — and that, perhaps, is the true magic of Santa Claus.



*Virginia’s story has inspired a musical, window display at Lord & Taylor, and a scholarship in her name.*



*Virginia’s original letter was discovered years later and valued at \$20,000-\$30,000.*

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